

# “Getting Started with Personal Development Planning”

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This article is based on a 40 minute workshop entitled “Getting Started” run at the 2006 National Residential Seminar of the Centre for Recording Achievement, November 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> 2006. The aim of the workshop was to introduce new-comers to the background, rationale and some sources of information to enable them to move forward with their work on PDP in a Higher Education context. In this workshop I used two documents with my personal interpretation on what each contains:

1. A set of questions to aid discussion put together by Dr John Peters, Associate Director for Research, CRA and University of Worcester (see appendix 1)
2. The Guidelines for HE Progress Files, available from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk>

Extracts from the Guidelines are in *italics*. The Guidelines are detailed, clear and set out what is expected from institutions. In addition to central e-based information on offer by such organisations as CRA, individual institutions have web sites that share good practice.

So if the Guidelines are for HE Progress Files.....

## **What is a Progress File?**

The term ‘Progress File’ provides the over arching title for what is basically two ‘physical’ elements, a transcript which had the requirement to be in place for the academic year 2002/3 and a Personal Development Record (PDR). The PDR is the evidence, in terms of a product, of the process of personal development planning. More often than not the PDR can and is described as a Personal Development Plan.

*Progress File ‘should consist of two elements: a transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies; a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development’. (Recommendation of the National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education; 1997)*

*Summary of Guidelines for HE progress files pg. 2*

One concept of the Progress File is that it provides students with both a process and a product that enables them to consider, articulate and evidence their (formal and informal) experiences and achievements while studying in higher education.

The two elements of the Progress File had different dates for implementation. Transcripts should have been in place since 2002/2 and Personal Development Planning from 2005/6. In terms of quality assessment, before 2005/6 institutions could say what they are doing in this area in the self-evaluation document but QAA cannot make a judgement on the activity. However, from 2005/6 QAA are able to include Progress Files in any assessment. A full explanation of the expected quality standards are to be found on pages 11 and 12 of the Guidelines.

What is also important to point out is that the PDP element covers all HEI’s and all awards.

*The PDP element of the policy objectives should be operational across the whole HE system and for all HE awards by 2005/6.*

*Summary of Guidelines for HE Progress Files pf. 2*

This requirement further confirms that there will be no one answer, process or product that will fit all institutions. From attending both national and local workshops on PDP what was actually very comforting was the feeling that there are many different strategic approaches to Progress Files and that there was not one institution or product that had got it right for the sector. However that comfortable feeling was quickly dispelled when you realise that you have to find out what works for your own institution, and the programmes of study it offers.

Factors to be considered here are likely to include: student and staff numbers, breadth of subjects offered, institutional culture, who or what department is tasked with the PDP operation, what external factors are involved/relevant (e.g. professional bodies, employers) and what (if any) is the existing practice. This is by no means an exhaustive list but indicates the need for a local solution.

What is very obvious when starting to discuss issues with colleagues is that we are all working at different rates, with different agendas, resources and structures, towards a common aim. The most valuable experience being that of sharing practice ...not always good, which allows you to learn and develop from others. A framework through which to consider this, in the form of a set of questions raising "Issues to consider when designing a Progress File System" has been developed by Dr. John Peters, CRA and the University of Worcester and is given as Appendix 1. I used this very effectively at the University of Wolverhampton to start discussions across my university of develop and institutional strategic framework. I worked directly with senior members of each academic school who has responsibility for their school responses to PDP. I led workshops to discuss what we each thought were the issues, the outcome being an agreed framework that states that:

- This will be a formative student-centred process.
- It should provide a product i.e. a file that documents a student's record of achievement and experience at the university. The progress file will be known as the PACE file. PACE standing for Personal, Academic, Career and Employability.
- It must be developmental.
- The product or file must be designed by all users
- It should include academic, personal, professional and key employability skills
- Any product should be for students and potentially for their future employers
- It should not be assessed unless it is identified by the school or subject and should be assessed within existing subject and school quality monitoring systems

### **Implementation issues**

- PDP must be integrated throughout the whole of the student experience
- Staff and students should be offered training
- PDP must be a mainstream activity
- It must be valued by both staff and students

This framework enabled us to start discussions on some key areas, for example if we believe that this process *should be used by students with tutor guidance* than how do we provide that guidance? – Through the personal tutor scheme? Within subjects? By PDP specialists? By mentors? .....etc.

### **What is personal development planning?**

Dearing (recommendation 20) describes it as the 'means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development.' In the QAA guidelines the definition is expanded to:

*'Personal development planning is a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development'*

*point 28.pg. 8 Guidelines for HE progress files*

Within my own institution there are different views on what PDP is. For some the PDP has more resonance and value as professional development. This could be developing the 'professionalism' of being a student, developing key learning skills or developing skills towards a professional understanding of skills needed for a particular subject such as nursing. Within our institutional framework we include Personal and Academic, Career and Employability (PACE) within our view of what we want students to develop and plan for, though this is not prescriptive or exclusive.

### **Staff motivation**

Talking to many colleagues both within my own institution and in other HEI's, pretty much all agree on the value of personal development planning. However when the concept is perceived as something new and different from what is already established practice then there can be a reluctance to engage with something perceived as new and different. In one instance in my own institution, when colleagues were asked whether they offered their students the opportunity for personal development planning no one identified that they did. However, when looking at their assessment regimes, the process was firmly embedded in the curriculum at all levels of study. As staff reluctance is perceived by many as a major risk factor in the effective implementation of Progress Files, then one of the first and most important tasks is to establish what is already happening. Once that has happened, then the next step is to clearly articulate that practice in a framework so that all parties feel confident that they are talking the same language.

One area that seems to be key to the success to the PDP process is how and where it is supported. For example does the PDP process sit with a personal tutor scheme? Careers? Student support? Etc. This is an area that I used the questions in Appendix 1 to simulate discussion.

### **Student motivation**

Student motivation is another 'high risk' area with many students demonstrating a strategic approach to learning, the question 'what's in it for me?' is raised. If students can not see any benefit in being asked to undertake, what might be in some cases, an additional task on top of already heavy work loads then the participation is likely to be very poor. During student focus groups at my institution, students who had undertaken the process of PDP most definitely said they got some benefit from it, but when asked if they would do this outside of their curriculum they said they would not, citing pressure on time as the main reason. Seeing a value and benefit from the process of PDP may not be something that students easily recognise. Developing employability skills is one way that a number of institutions are using to motivate students to take and make relevant the process of PDP. If you take the characteristics of effective PDP practice as stated in section 47 pg. 13 of the Guidelines. You can argue that effective employability strategies demonstrate those same characteristics.

*"PDP is likely to be most effective when it is:*

*A mainstream academic activity  
Linked to the learning outcomes  
Undertaken regularly  
Supported and valued by staff  
Supported by institutional structures, resources and expertise  
Owned by the learner  
Seen to be valued by society"*

The Higher Education Academy has some substantial resources regarding employability including a new guide for HE practitioners called “Student employability profiles” which can be found on their website- [www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk). This guide provides an overview of 50 different discipline profiles and offers ways of how these can be used in such areas as curriculum design.

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